

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

Food Safety Through the Prism of COVID-19

It is clear that COVID-19 is not a foodborne disease. However, the coronavirus pandemic has broadened and reprioritized consumers' food safety concerns. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have worked to reassure consumers that food is safe from coronavirus, but the public's concern about food safety and the handling of foods is prevailing. On June 24, 2020, the USDA/FDA issued a joint statement regarding food export restriction and COVID-19, confirming that "there is no evidence that people can contract COVID-19 from food or from food packaging." They further stated that "confidence [about food safety] includes foods that may have been handled by potentially infected food system workers."

Despite such assurances, consumers now rank food handling/food preparation related to the risk of COVID-19 as the food safety issue that is of second most importance to them, after foodborne illness, per the International Food Information Council's (IFIC) 2020 *Food & Health Survey*, released in mid-April. Additional food safety concerns, in descending order, include chemicals in food, carcinogens, pesticide residues, food additives/ingredients, antibiotics/hormones, and GMOs, according to the IFIC research.

One-third of shoppers want their stores to minimize employee handling of foods, per the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) June 2020 *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends* report. Perhaps, most important, the pandemic has focused attention on proper hygiene and handwashing; 52% of adults say they wash their hands after grocery shopping, according to IFIC.

In May, 36% of adults said they were buying more packaged foods; moreover, they now have a more favorable opinion about the safety of packaged food than before COVID-19, per IFIC. Sales of fixed-weight, prepacked UPC-coded items sold in sealed packages/bags (not bulk or open to the consumer) grew the fastest

in every top-selling produce category and posted the highest sales growth in produce versus 2019, per IRI's June 2020 "Fresh Produce in the Era of COVID-19" webinar.

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Since the start of the pandemic, handling concerns have negatively impacted the deli, fresh prepared foods, and bakery departments, according to IRI data shared by the International Dairy Deli Bakery Association (IDDBA) in a June 2020 "COVID-19 Impact" webinar. As of mid-April, sales of fresh prepared deli foods were down 47% versus 2019, and prepackaged bakery items dramatically outsold those in the in-store fresh bakery, IDDBA reports. Sales of prepackaged, non-UPC presliced/packaged random-weight deli meats/cheeses skyrocketed, even while sales across all deli categories fell dramatically, per IDDBA.

For the week ending June 21, 2020, deli sales were still down 6% and prepared foods down 18.7%, per IRI. One in 10 consumers is buying more plastic-wrapped bakery items, according to IDDBA.

The fact that a product is processed now impacts food purchases for 53% of consumers, IFIC reports. Processed meat volume sales jumped 25% for ham/pork, 37% for sausage, and 43% for bacon for the year ended May 30, 2020, per IRI's *Mid-year Meat Performance Review*. Thirty-seven percent of consumers now say a label stating a product is pasteurized is important when shopping for food, according to the Hartman Group's *Organic & Beyond 2020* report.

Four in 10 consumers (42%) are concerned about safety when buying food online, per IFIC. According to FMI's June 2020 shopping report, 52% order at least some groceries online; 23% place online orders for

grocery items nearly every time they shop.

In 2020, 53% of adults say they are buying foods that are clean, natural, organic, or local as a healthy eating strategy; this is up from

48% in 2019, per FMI's shopper report. Three in 10 consumers buy organic foods weekly and 53% do so monthly, according to Hartman data. For the five weeks ending May 31, 2020, sales of natural and organic food remained high, up 14%. Private label organic penetration jumped 10% during the pandemic to 48%, according to IRI data. In 2019, organic food/beverage sales reached \$50 billion, up 4.6% versus 2018, per the Organic Trade Association.

Consumers want food that they believe has been safely sourced. Over half (55%) say that information on a product's country of origin is extremely important to them, per FMI's 2020 *The Power of Health & Well-Being* report. Sourcing of ingredients, country of origin, manufacturing processes, and animal welfare are the most important information among those who scan a QR code, per FMI.

Seven in 10 consumers (69%) continue to look for locally grown or produced foods. Two-thirds buy produce at farmers markets, and six in 10 shop at a farmers market at least occasionally, according to FMI's 2020 *Power of Produce* report.

Lastly, 55% of shoppers say that food allergies or intolerances affect the way they shop, according to IRI's June 2020 webinar "Charting the Course for Center Store Growth." **FT**



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